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ABSTRACT

Original stories can provide a wealth of opportunity for forensics competitors. Original storytelling requires the sharing of a personal experience or family narrative that is adaptable to audiences differing in age and education. Community organizations and groups are invited to participate as audience members and vary from round to round. Evaluation is based on how well the competitor relates to the "real" audience in comparison to the other competitors in the round. An example of a family narrative is "The Blizzard of 1957," a story that has been told in the Miller family since 1957. This story, which relates how the family endured the blizzard, was one of many stories that became rituals in the family, welcoming the first snowstorm or spring rain. Storytelling is a fundamental, persuasive, and powerful mode of communicating, which provides a unique alternative for competitors to share their narratives with various audiences ranging from preschool aged children to retired individuals. Audience adaptation is a fundamental part of storytelling. Inviting community organizations and groups to participate can foster skills in audience adaptation and provide a service to the community. Storytelling offers a credible alternative to traditional forensics tournaments. (PRA)

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Storytelling: The Original Narrative

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Storytelling: The Original Narrative

During the past two years we have offered original storytelling as an event at the Gorilla Individual Events Tournament at Pittsburg State University. At both tournaments, preschool students and their parents have been invited to participate as audience members during one preliminary round and the final round of competition. Although it took time and effort to organize the event, the rewards certainly outweighed the costs. Not only did the competitors find it rewarding to address a "real" audience, but the advantages for the community were significant as well.

If your organization is like ours, you are constantly looking for ways to increase your visibility and contribution and to increase your students' skills in adapting to wide and changing audiences in both material and delivery. In this paper, I will provide a description of the event, an example of an original story and discuss theoretical perspectives concerning narratives and audience adaptation.

Original Storytelling

Description:

Original storytelling requires the sharing of a personal experience or family narrative that is adaptable to audiences differing in age and education. "Real" audiences will be invited to participate in the activity and will vary from round to round.

Criteria:

1) The story or stories must be appropriate for the "real" audience participating in the event.

2) Each story must specify a time and place of origin to establish authenticity and create historical significance.

3) Tellers should present significant details to bring the characters and events to life.

4) Scripts are not required but are permitted. Use of a script will not count against the competitor.

5) There will be a seven minute time limit.

Evaluation will be based on how well the competitor relates to the "real" audience in comparison to the other competitors in the round. It is suggested that each round be limited to five competitors since young listeners have short attention spans.

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A Family Narrative

This is an example of a family narrative that has been told in the Miller family since 1957.

"The Blizzard of 1957"

I will tell this story as my father told it to me. It is a true story that describes one of many challenges our family faced as farmers on the plains of southwestern Kansas.

The blizzard of 1957 was the most severe by far for the farmers of Seward County. As the first snowflakes covered the plains, I knew that it was going to be a long and difficult ordeal. We hardly had time to prepare ourselves--let alone the livestock. As it turned out, no amount of preparation could have made the blizzard more endurable.

During the first part of the snowstorm, Grandpa and I had to string a rope between the house and the barn so that we wouldn't get lost walking back and forth. The snow was so dense and the wind so strong, that without the rope as a guide we would have surely wandered off into the blindness. One morning, Grandpa was walking along the rope on his way to milk the cows. He felt a brush across the top of his

head--followed by a muffled thud. He didn't know it at the time, but the wind had torn a spoke right off the windmill and tossed it next to Grandpa and the rope. After the snow melted, Grandpa knew he had been blessed that day. The spoke missed him by inches.

As the days passed, the snow drifted, then froze. The drifts covered the corral and the cattle began to roam. Some cattle found their way to the house, others climbed onto the roof of the barn, and others wandered away. Fifteen of the 27 cows were lost. Once the snow stopped, your mother grabbed a bucket of feed and started walking the countryside yelling for the "suey...cows" to come home. Seven of the fifteen cows must have heard her voice or picked up the scent of the grain, for they followed her home. It was a bittersweet reunion as all seven had either been blinded or partially blinded by the snow. Sad to tell you, we had to sell them to slaughter.

The snow lasted for nearly two weeks--off and on. One morning, your sister was looking out of the front room window. Suddenly she let out a scream, "They're coming to get us! They're coming to get us!" Your mom

and I thought she had finally gone mad because of the whiteness. She kept yelling, "They're coming to get us!" all the way up to her bedroom. Your grandparents, mom, and I walked over to the window and got quite a surprise ourselves. Maybe she was right. Rolling into the drive was a National Guard army tank from Liberal. Your grandpa and I stepped out onto the porch, and the two guardsmen got out of the tank and walked up to us. They were not out to get anybody--they were delivering groceries to all the farm families trapped because of the snow.

After a few minutes of conversation, one of the guardsmen walked back to the tank to get our groceries. He returned with a strange look on his face and a potato in each hand. Evidently, he had forgotten to close the lid of the trunk attached to the back of the tank, and all the food had fallen out except for the two potatoes. Well, your mom and grandma grabbed both the potatoes and offered the two men their fair share of two fried potatoes. They declined the offer and vowed they "would return" with more supplies. We all got a big kick out of those two--it was a good thing we weren't hungry or we would have been in a terrible mess.

Whenever I think of storytelling, I think of the cold winter nights when my three brothers, my sister, and I would cuddle underneath homemade quilts in front of the one gas stove intended to heat our five bedroom, two-story home in western Kansas. The stove was more than a gathering place to keep warm, it was a catalyst for many tales of how our parents met in a soda shop in Okmulgee, Oklahoma, during WWII and how our mother fought racism as a "half breed" living off the reservations and how our grandparents left the zinc mines of western Missouri for farmland purchased site unseen in southwestern Kansas. Many of the stories our parents and grandparents shared became rituals, welcoming the first snowstorm or spring rain or the occasional dust storm which was "sent to remind us of the misfortunes of the dirty 30's."

"The Blizzard of 1957" is an abbreviated version of one such story. I remember hearing the story over and over as a child. Each time it was shared, something new was added. The portion about the cattle being lost and sold to slaughter was not shared with me until I was in fifth or sixth grade. I remember my father saying, "Oh, you haven't heard this part? Well, you're a little older now, you can hear a little more." Other stories exhibited similar development, and each telling included new

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facts, offering unique experiences of our family history and the geographical location in which we lived.

Storytelling as a forensics event has taken on a variety of interpretations ranging from the telling of published literature to impromptu tales made up from topics selected at the tournament. Although all techniques foster important skills, they are limited in scope when compared to the sharing of an original story/narrative with a "real" audience, an audience other than the typical tournament/college educated audience. The use of the original narrative in relation to a "real" audience broadens the scope and offers forensics competitors a legitimate alternative when competing in collegiate forensics. As a rationale for this event, I will discuss the importance of narratives and audience adaptation in relation to the telling of an original story.

The Narrative

Karen Baldwin (1983) establishes the relevance of family narratives by explaining that:

> Families have well developed, traditionally persistent and artistically recreative bodies of oral narrations as well as their own proverb forms and folk speech, rhymes and rituals, folk poetry, music and song. Families generate

> and transmit jokes and anecdotes, homilies and hero legends --and whole fictions--which celebrate and tell of current and historic circumstances; aspirations, failed and realized; and exploits of the famous, infamous and ordinary among their kin and kind. Indeed, the entire life cycle of the family is framed in narrative performance (69).

Our family, too, is "framed in narrative performance." Even the passing of the original tellers does not cause the telling to become stagnant, it simply adds to the richness. As a new teller assumes the telling, new stories are created and shared. These new stories add to the wealth of our family history. Baldwin (1983) further states that "the content, color and textured meaning of our homegrown telling repertories change a bit with each season of the family, each generation of its tellers" (71). This richness is well exhibited in the native American stories described by Lenore Keeshig-Tobias (1989, Bruchac):

> Storytelling is never done for sheer entertainment, for the stories were and are a record of proud nations confident in their achievements and their ways of life. Stories contain information about tribal values, patterns of the environment and growing seasons, ceremonial or religious detail, social roles, geographical formations, factual and symbolic data,

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animal and human traits (89).

Regardless of the speaker's race or gender, the telling of an original narrative serves significant purposes for family and society. Walter Fisher (1987) suggests "that human beings are inherently storytellers who have a natural capacity to recognize the coherence and fidelity of stories they tell and experience" (24). Cooper (1991) declares that narratives fulfill the need for historical relevance, preserving familial and societal history. Each story provides "a connection to our past and creates identity in our present."

Georges (1987) summarizes the case for storytelling in that there are numerous lessons to be learned from firsthand experiences and examples. Most importantly, storytelling is a "fundamental, pervasive and powerful mode of communicating."

Audience Adaptation

As with all communication exercises, formal or informal, we are taught to consider the audience as a primary guide in topic selection and adaptation. As my father changed "The Blizzard of 1957," so, too, must other stories change in order to adapt to specific audience variables. Most forensics events tend to prescribe a fairly standard audience consisting of college

educated judges and competitors. Although this audience may be challenging, the standard events provide little opportunity for variety. Storytelling, as described in this paper, does provide a unique alternative for competitors to share their narratives with various audiences ranging from preschool aged children to retired individuals.

> Georges (1987) suggests that:
>
> while human beings are storytellers with many tales to tell, none tells all his or her stories to everyone or even to any one indiscriminately. It is not some set of abstract 'cultural rules' that determines who tells what to whom and when, but rather the judgments made by individual human beings. . .[concerning] timeliness and appropriateness (120).

Audience adaptation is a fundamental part of storytelling. Wilson (Toelken, 1979) stresses the importance of an audience as "the responsive part" of the performance. "If the story is to live, [the storytellers] cannot, in the telling of it, depart too far from the value center of the audience whose approval they seek" (106). Toelken (1979) specifically encourages flexibility when addressing differences in age and familiarity.

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Conclusion

Original stories can provide a wealth of opportunity for forensics competitors. Inviting community organizations and groups to participate can foster skills in audience adaptation and provide service to the community. If you are looking for a credible alternative for your next tournament, consider original storytelling.

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